

RONDO HATTON
"Beneath the Skin"

Backstage with "SOUPY SALES"

FILMFAX

The Magazine of Film & Television

No. 26
April/May
1991
\$4.95

**SAM
ARKOFF**
Tells All About A.I.P.



An Interview with
**CLARENCE
"DUCKY" NASH**

The Voice of "Donald Duck"
For Over Fifty Years!





The World's Favorite Wise Quacker

Clarence "Ducky" Nash

For over fifty years, he was the voice of Walt Disney's most famous fowl player

Article and Interview by GREGORY J. M. CATSOS

You may not recognize the name Clarence Nash, but you'd know his voice anywhere. For over 50 years, Nash was the one and only voice of Donald Duck, Walt Disney's lovable, but feisty, web-footed cartoon character. During his illustrious career, Donald Duck appeared in over 150 cartoons and six feature films (Nash's last theatrical cartoon was the featurette *Mickey's Christmas Carol* in 1983.) and few would argue that it was Nash's unique vocal characterization that helped make Donald the world's favorite fowl.

For most of Nash's career, many fans were unaware of his association with Donald Duck. But this relative obscurity really didn't bother him. "It was all right with me that people didn't know who I was," Nash admitted, "but I was happy when they eventually *did* find out. In the early days, Walt didn't want us voices to have any publicity. I went along with his wishes, but one time my name got out in the newspapers. Walt and I had a big argument over it, but when I left his office I wasn't upset because Walt was a very fair man. A

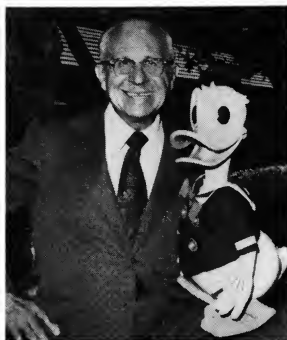
week later, I got a raise in pay!"

When the studio celebrated Donald Duck's fiftieth birthday in 1984, Nash was very ill at the time, but that didn't deter him from making special appearances at the Disney Studio and at Disneyland. It wasn't the first time Nash had gone the extra mile for his fans. Over the years, he also unselfishly entertained (without pay) at school assemblies, hospitals, and orphanages accompanied by his Donald (ventriloquist) dummy. "I began entertaining children," commented Nash,

"when my daughters were little, and it was a lot of fun. I never made a million bucks out of doing Donald's voice, but I'm a millionaire in the sense that I feel successful about what I've accomplished. I've contributed something worthwhile to a cartoon character that has gone around the globe. I feel good about that because it's made so many people laugh."

Today, Donald Duck cartoons are shown in 29 countries. But when the studio first released Donald's animated adventures abroad, his voice had to be dubbed in the appropriate foreign language. Although the words were written out phonetically for Nash to speak, one aspect of the dialogue created a unique challenge. "I had to learn to quack in Spanish, Portuguese, French, Italian, German, Dutch, Swedish, and even Chinese," chuckled Nash. "There were, however, foreign-language coaches who helped me. I'd listen through earphones to the English dialogue, and I'd match the length and mood of the dialogue in the language. It was critical to get everything down pat so they never had to reanimate. It had to seem like the language came out smoothly and matched the mouth movements of Donald."

Nash originally had no idea that Donald Duck's popularity would endure. "Donald lasted a lot longer than I thought he would," Nash confided. "I figured he was like any other cartoon character who eventually would run his course. It never oc-



An unbeatable team: Clarence Nash and Donald.

curred to me he'd last for 50 years! It was a job, but also something I liked to do. I told Walt Disney once, 'I've got the ideal job for a lazy man!' Oh, I *did* work hard sometimes, but when you love what you're doing, it's not really work."

Clarence "Ducky" Nash was born in Watonga, Oklahoma on December 7, 1904. He spent his childhood in Missouri and his family settled in California during Nash's early teens. As a youngster, Nash discovered he had a unique talent for mimicking dogs, cats, chickens, horses, frogs, pigs, and birds, and often enter-

tained family and friends with his amusing voices. One of Nash's specialties, however, was imitating his pet goat's bleating sound.

"When I was 13 years old," recalled Nash, "I had a baby billy goat which I fed with a bottle. When I'd leave her, she'd cry and I learned to imitate that cry. Then I thought, 'Maybe I can say words with that sound.' And I tried it out on some of my friends. One day when we were coming home from school I tried to recite 'Mary Had A Little Lamb' with that goat's voice. My friends all laughed. Even then, I felt that I might capitalize on it someday."

By the 1920s, Nash had become a well-known entertainer on the Chautauqua (traveling tent show) circuit, playing a mandolin and performing several bird and animal imitations. His most popular encore—you guessed it—was an imitation of a baby goat reciting "Mary Had A Little Lamb." Years later, Nash's talking goat was to evolve into one of the most famous voices in the world.

On January 25, 1930 Nash married Margie Seamans and in 1932 moved from San Francisco to Los Angeles in search of work as an entertainer. "My wife and I had only 60 cents in our pockets!" Nash recalled. Luckily, he got a chance to do his impressions on a radio show and this ultimately led to a promotional job with the Adohr Milk company as their "whistling bird-

Continued on next page



Donald shows off his muscles to a bevy of dark-haired bathing beauties in this scene from the live-action/animation classic *The Three Caballeros*.

man" and representative. As a special stunt, he also drove a miniature milk wagon pulled by a team of miniature horses.

At about the same time, Nash heard that Walt Disney was looking for people who could provide animal sounds for his cartoons. One day, on an impulse, he decided to visit the Disney studio. "On my way to work," he explained, "I was driving my milk truck down Hyperion Boulevard. I saw this big billboard picture of Mickey Mouse on a building and it said, 'Walt Disney Studios, the home of Mickey Mouse.' So I pulled over to the curb and decided to go in. I gave the receptionist a circular advertising my work with the milk company—and my bird imitations. I suggested she give it to somebody who might be interested." A few days later, an animation director from Disney Studios, Wilfred Jackson, called Nash to audition.

"The director liked my bird sounds," Nash remembered. "He said, 'We can use them. What else can you do?' So I did my whole act, all the farm animal sounds and my specialty, 'Mary Had A Little Lamb.' Right in the middle of my recitation, the director reached over on his desk and secretly switched on the intercom. The sound went into Walt Disney's office. Walt came down. After I finished my recitation, I quacked like a duck. Walt looked at the director and said, 'That's our talking duck! That's the duck we've been looking for.'" A star was born.

Unbeknownst to Nash, he really didn't have to worry about getting the job. It was later discovered that Disney had previously heard Nash on a radio program and already was interested in hiring him. Soon after that audition, Clarence Nash signed a contract with Disney and became the



Donald interrupts his boss and mentor, Walt Disney, during the filming of a TV episode in the '50s.

studio's 125th employee (Disney now employs more than 20,000), but earning the same money he had been making at the milk company, \$35 a week.

On the homefront, Margie was not quite as enthusiastic about Nash's career move. When Clarence told his wife that he was quitting his job with Adohr Milk to do the voice of a duck character, she was skeptical. "That's great," she said quietly, "but it probably won't last."

"Walt really wasn't ready yet to make a cartoon with a duck," said Nash, "but the same day of my audition he *did* have me

record some bird sounds for a 'Silly Symphony' cartoon, 'In A Bird Store.'"

Donald Duck finally made his Technicolor film debut on June 9, 1934 as a selfish but lovable duck character. But it was Donald's second cartoon, "The Orphan's Benefit" (1934), that convinced Disney that the duck had real screen presence and could become a feather in the studio's cap. In that cartoon, Donald lost his temper for the first time, and that explosive aspect of his personality soon became his trademark. Donald Duck was born and he literally had two creative parents. Many of Donald's tantrums were ad-libbed by Nash when he was recording the voice tracks for the cartoons, but some of the important aspects of Donald Duck's personality, such as the volatile temper, infectious laugh and other characteristics, were suggested by Walt Disney.

"Before Walt came up with the idea," admitted Nash, "I had never even thought of being angry or laughing in a duck's voice. But the more I learned to use it, the more it developed. Walt believed it was important for Donald to have a strong personality. He even wanted Donald's birthday to be on Friday the 13th—March 13 to be exact!"

"It was also Disney's idea to have Donald dressed up in a sailor suit," Nash continued. "Donald is a duck, and ducks are associated with water. Therefore, it seemed only natural to have Donald dressed as a sailor."

Nash made some of his own unique contributions to Donald as well. Although originally suggested by Disney, it was Nash who developed Donald's laugh and temper. Some of the story ideas also were his, with the dialogue written specially so that Nash could have some freedom in contributing to the character. And some of



A slightly different-looking Donald made his first film appearance in "The Wise Little Hen" in 1934.

those ideas hit close to home. "When I was a kid I had a bad temper like Donald's. I could get mad at the drop of a hat! [laughs] Once I did a cartoon called 'Cured Duck' (1945) where Donald, at Daisy's insistence, took a course on how to control his temper. But it didn't work!"

It was also Nash's suggestion that his alter ego should be allowed to express a sensitive, artistic side. "I figured," reasoned Nash, "if Donald could talk, why not let him sing too? I always was a music fan. So in the coming years Donald got to stretch his quacky vocal chords in such cartoons as 'The Three Caballeros' (1945), 'Mickey's Grand Opera' (1936), 'Don Donald' (1937), 'Old MacDonald's Duck' (1941), and 'Donald's Garden' (1942)."

Donald's distinctive voice has always remained the same, but the original character was drawn quite differently than the argumentative avian we know and love. "Donald was taller and heavier at first," explained Nash. The early Donald even had a longer duck bill. But Donald always had his sailor suit and hat!"

While Donald may have changed over the years, the basic procedure for making the cartoons remained extremely involved. "First, the writers brought the story boards to the sound stage," Nash explained, "and went over the story with me. Donald's voice was recorded first. In fact, all the voices were recorded before the animators drew any of the pictures. The sound department analyzed and timed Donald's dialogue, so the animators knew just how many frames to make it. Later, my voice was synchronized perfectly with Donald's mouth movements."

It also took careful preparation to do Donald's voice properly. "My first problem was the choice of vocabulary that would insure Donald Duck could be understood. After all, he could not be totally unintelligible! The most important thing about Donald was his voice. That was his asset. The writers always kept the Duck dialogue down to a minimum because they discovered it worked best when his sentences were kept short."

By 1939, the writers, the sound department, and Nash had tested a number of phrases that were understandable in Donald's voice. It was particularly important for the voices to be clear. "There were certain phrases that had been tested for clarity, so we used the same expressions over and over again. We repeated things like: 'Hey, what's the big idea?' 'Oh, boy!' 'Well, I'll be,' 'Phooey!' 'Hey, Toots,' 'Let me go!' or, 'Just leave it to your uncle Donald.'"

Although Donald's voice seemed to come quite naturally to Nash, he recalled that once, in the late 1930s, he did run into a problem. "In the beginning," stated Nash, "Donald had just a little bit of dialogue in the cartoons. As he grew more successful his dialogue expanded. One day I recorded so much that I went home hoarse. After dinner, I tried doing Donald's voice and couldn't do it! I was worried! My wife told me it would be OK, but I didn't sleep well that night. When I got up in the morning,

the first thing I did was see if the duck voice was still there. It was, and I never worried again."

Audiences have often imagined that Donald's blustery outbursts are cursing—albeit in "duck," but believe it or not, there was a time when Donald Duck was actually censored. "We *did* have a problem over Donald's language once," said Nash with a laugh. "It was in his second cartoon, 'The Orphan's Benefit.' There was a talent show for orphans where Donald recites 'Mary Had A Little Lamb' and 'Little Boy Blue.' But he appears before an audience of child hecklers and the children laugh and throw things at him. Donald gets very mad and says, 'Oh, nuts!'"

"Now in those days there was an organization called the Hays Office, which was a censorship board for all movies. Before this cartoon premiered, a man from the Hays organization came to the studio to see it. Movie censorship was strict then. You couldn't even say 'Oh, nuts!' on screen because 'nuts' was considered to be vulgar. Fortunately, the man from the Hays Office laughed so hard he let it go. But later on in 1941, we remade 'The Orphan's Benefit' in color. When I recorded the

dialogue again, I couldn't say 'Oh, nuts!' that time. I had to have Donald say 'I give up!' instead."

According to Nash, the studio was trying to formulate Donald's character in his early cartoons. "The Band Concert" (1935) was an example. "Donald was portrayed as an instigator," said Nash. "This was also the first Mickey Mouse cartoon to be made in Technicolor. In 'The Band Concert,' Mickey is conducting the 'William Tell Overture' in a park concert. Donald interrupts the music by trying to sell ice cream and peanuts to the audience. Then Donald starts playing 'Turkey In The Straw' on a fife and disrupts the whole orchestra! Mickey breaks the fife over his knee, but Donald has an endless supply of fifes up his sleeve. Suddenly a tornado hits and picks up the entire orchestra in the air. But Mickey continues to conduct the orchestra and they continue to play their instruments. It was quite imaginative!"

Originally, Donald Duck played second fiddle to Mickey Mouse and he was the perfect foil. But by the late 1930s, Mickey's stardom began to fade and Donald's was on the rise. Eventually, Donald's popular-

Continued on page 94



Clarence Nash and Donald, together as always, during a cartoon recording session in the 1940s.

ity would virtually eclipse Mickey's.

"Donald's personality was the exact opposite of Mickey's," Nash observed, "and it was intended to be that way. Walt Disney said that Donald was 'an escape, a relief from Mickey Mouse's inhibitions!' Walt felt limited in what he could do with Mickey because Mickey was basically a happy fellow, even tempered, and nice. Donald was more versatile. Of course, Donald's tantrums were his trademark. He was always determined to have his way. When he can't, he loses control. His hair-trigger temper provided the studio with many gag possibilities and situations.

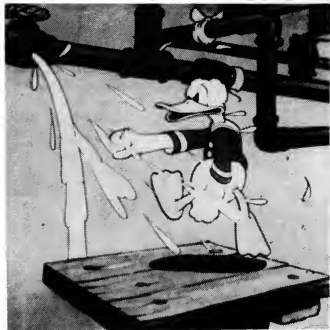
"Since Donald has a bad temper, he has problems with everybody and everything. He gets frustrated when things go wrong. How Donald handled adversity brought out his true character. In all the cartoons I did, it always seemed like Donald was upset about something. He was also very sensitive about himself. He likes to bother other people, but gets very angry when someone bothers him! The animators could do more with Donald than they could with Mickey."

Donald Duck really became a star in 1937 with "Don Donald." Dressed up in

Mexican apparel, he romanced and serenaded Donna Duck (later to become Daisy Duck). This was the first cartoon in which he carried the story without Mickey. The Duck had arrived.

Donald officially met Daisy Duck in "Mr. Duck Steps Out" in 1940. It was in this cartoon that he first said, "Come on Toots! How about a little kiss?" They even danced the Jitterbug together. But this first date was ruined by Donald's three mischievous nephews (Huey, Dewey, and Louie). Nevertheless, Donald's long relationship with Daisy was established, a romance that has endured. "Daisy was Donald's perfect match," said Nash. "She was the only cartoon character equal to Donald in temperament and spirit. Daisy was just as feisty as him!" The two ducks never married however. Disney didn't allow his cartoon characters to marry.

During World War II, Donald Duck, like many other all-American cartoon characters, did his part for Uncle Sam and was featured in a series of patriotic cartoons: "Der Fuehrer's Face" (1943, which won an Oscar), "Donald Gets Drafted" (1942), "The Vanishing Private" (1942), "Fall Out—Fall In" (1943), "The Old Army Game" (1943), "Home Defense" (1943), and "Commando Duck" (1944).



A frustrated Donald in *Donald and Pluto* (1936).

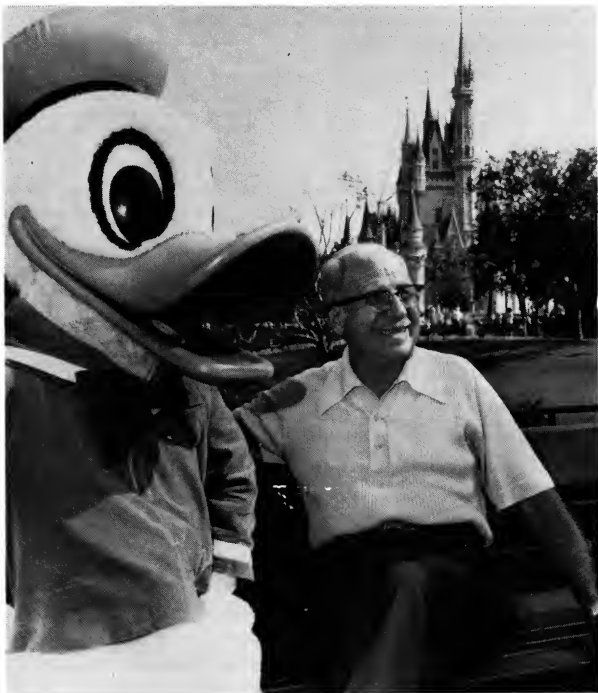
"In 'Donald Gets Drafted,'" recalled Nash, "he went through the same experiences that millions of draftees could identify with. Donald went through a physical. He was on KP duty. He was afraid of his drill sergeant. And later on, he marched until his feet were ready to fall off."

"Der Fuehrer's Face" became one of Donald's most famous shorts. An "anti-Nazi" animated classic, it featured Donald as an unhappy factory worker in Nazi Germany. "Donald is an oppressed worker in a German munitions factory," continued Nash. "He works feverishly on an assembly line, isn't allowed a vacation, and is forced to salute pictures of Hitler, Hirohito, and Mussolini. He says, 'Ah, heil!' then wakes up wearing red, white, and blue pajamas and realizes he was only having a nightmare. He's relieved to be home in America. He says, 'I am proud to be a citizen of the United States! I was very proud of doing that cartoon.'"

"Der Fuehrer's Face" was the only Donald Duck cartoon to win an Academy Award for Best Cartoon Short subject. (Eight other cartoons starring Donald have been nominated for Oscars.) This cartoon also became famous for its theme song, recorded later by the zany Spike Jones and His City Slicker Orchestra.

The war effort wasn't the only time Donald worked for the government. In 1942, a new law was passed whereby millions of Americans became eligible to pay income tax for the first time. So the Treasury Department commissioned Walt Disney to produce a cartoon that would persuade people to make speedy and voluntary tax payments. Disney intended to use Donald Duck in a cartoon called "The New Spirit." Disney showed the story idea to the Secretary of the Treasury, Henry Morgenthau, Jr., but Morgenthau was unimpressed with Donald Duck. He preferred that Disney create a new character instead, a kind of "Mr. Average Taxpayer." To Disney, that seemed like a kick in the tail feather.

"Morgenthau told Walt that he didn't like Donald Duck," Nash stated. "Walt got very angry and told Morgenthau that giving Donald Duck to the U.S. Treasury



Clarence Nash is visited by a life-size version of his animated friend as he relaxes at Disneyland.

was like MGM donating Clark Gable. Donald had become the top star at the studio, and Disney considered him 'the Gable of our stable!' Morgenthau relented and the cartoon featured Donald Duck."

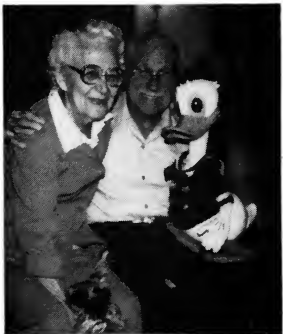
World War II had the unpleasant side effect of limiting Disney's European market, so he began looking for new ones. Nelson Rockefeller, coordinator for Latin American Affairs, invited Disney to make a good will tour of South America where his cartoons were very popular, so Disney decided to combine the tour with a film project. Disney, his wife, and a group of animators made a two-month tour of Brazil, Argentina, Bolivia, and Chile. The group returned with the necessary material and enough live-action color footage to make two successful feature films, *Saludos Amigos* (1943) and *The Three Caballeros* (1945). Both pictures feature Donald as an American tourist who shows Latin America what a friendly neighbor the United States is. Definitely not the 'ugly American duckling' for Donald!

"Donald did a lot of acting in those films," Nash noted. "He even got to sing along with a popular song, 'You Belong To My Heart,' in *The Three Caballeros*. Donald also danced the Samba in those films, which I can't even do in real life!" *The Three Caballeros* was the first feature film that cleverly combined live action footage with animation, a major breakthrough for the studio.

During all the years that Nash was at the Disney Studio, he both respected and liked his employer. "Walt was a fine fellow," Nash recalled, "but he was also a task-master at the same time. He was such a perfectionist about his cartoons. Walt personally supervised many of them because he wanted them done right, and didn't care how much it would cost him. He even discarded expensive footage of a cartoon if it didn't please him. Walt could be forceful with his language—and with the animators—in order to get what he wanted on the screen. He had an uncanny instinct about what pleased audiences. I liked Walt very much and felt fortunate to have known and worked for him."

In addition to doing Donald Duck's voice, Clarence Nash also provided voices for Daisy Duck (until 1947); Donald's nephews (Huey, Dewey, and Louie); Jimmy Crickett (after the death of Cliff Edwards); Mickey Mouse (a few times); a bullfrog in *Bambi*; Mr. Bluebird in *Song of the South*; bird sounds in *Snow White*; donkey bray sounds in *Pinocchio*; dog sounds in *101 Dalmatians*; and even bird sounds in the Tiki Room at Disneyland.

Nash also appeared on *The Burns & Allen Radio Show*. "I was Gracie's pet duck, Herman," recalled Nash. "This duck liked Gracie because she was nice to him, but when George came on the scene the duck would quack angrily at him!" Nash was only allowed to quack because his exclusive contract with the Disney Studios prohibited him from talking like Donald outside the studio.



Nash and wife Margie together at home in '84.

In the 1950s, Donald Duck and Clarence "Ducky" Nash made the transition from motion pictures to television. Donald made his auspicious TV debut on *The Walt Disney Show* in 1954. He also made appearances on *The Mickey Mouse Club*.

Why has Donald Duck endured so long in popularity? Nash offered this explanation: "I think what makes Donald Duck so popular, so special, is that he has all the

attributes we have—good and bad. I think that has contributed most to his mass appeal. That's why he still endures. Donald displays human emotions and traits that many of us identify with. He gets angry, sad, jealous, self-centered, and sometimes a bit too mischievous. He also has trouble with household gadgets and cars, not to mention his girlfriend Daisy. Through him, we recognize our own faults and shortcomings. When people laugh at his antics, they are also laughing at themselves."

If Nash hadn't been the voice of Donald, he probably would have felt like a duck out of water. However, when asked what he might have been doing had he not done Donald's voice all those years, "Ducky" Nash paused and answered with a grin: "Well, originally I wanted to make a career in medicine and become a doctor. I never attained that goal. Instead, I became the world's biggest quack!"

POSTSCRIPT

Clarence Nash died of leukemia on February 20, 1985, but he lives on in animation history. Nash is survived by his devoted wife of fifty-five years, Margie; their two married daughters, Kay and Peggy; eight grandchildren; and five great grandchildren.



Above, Donald dances with a lovely ladyfriend in this scene from *The Three Caballeros* (1945). Insert: Don does the samba to "Tico Tico" with Jose Carioca in Disney's *Saludos Amigos* (1943).